

A Cold or the Flu?

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Each year millions of Americans come down with a cold, influenza (flu) and other respiratory illnesses. The symptoms of these illnesses are very similar. So how do you know if you have a cold or the flu? And how do you know when to visit your health care provider?

A cold is usually a mild illness that often starts with tiredness, sneezing, coughing and a runny nose. It may cause a low-grade fever of one or two degrees higher than normal. Other symptoms may include muscle aches, a scratchy or sore throat, watery eyes and a headache.

Influenza, or the flu, usually starts suddenly and hits hard. It may cause tiredness, weakness, fever, dry cough, runny nose, chills, muscle aches, severe headache, eye pain and a sore throat. It generally takes longer to recover from the flu than it does to recover from a cold.

To help determine if you are fighting a cold or the flu, answer these questions:

	Cold	Flu
Did your illness come on . . .	slowly	suddenly
Do you have . . .	no (or mild) fever	a high fever
Is your exhaustion level . . .	mild	severe
Is your cough . . .	severe or hacking	dry
Is your throat . . .	sore	fine
Is your head . . .	fine	aching
Is your appetite . . .	normal	decreased
Are your muscles . . .	fine	aching
Do you have . . .	no chills	chills

If most of your answers fell into the first column, you likely have a cold. If most of your answers fell into the second column, you likely have the flu. Flu symptoms may vary from person to person, though, and this chart is not a diagnostic tool. If you suspect you may have the flu, or if you have any concerns, contact your health care provider.

If you do have a cold or the flu, there are steps you can take to recover more quickly.

- Stay home. Rest is important to help you get better, and if you are at home, you won't be spreading illness to other people.
- Drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids. Hot liquids may relieve congestion and sore throat pain.
- Avoid smoking or secondhand smoke, which can make cold symptoms worse.
- Gargle with warm salt water a few times each day to relieve a sore throat. Throat sprays and lozenges may also help.
- Use saline (salt water) nose drops to loosen mucus and moisten the tender skin in your nose.
- Take appropriate medication. No medicine can cure a cold or the flu. Your health care provider may prescribe an antiviral medication, which must be taken within 1 to 2 days of the time your first symptoms appear. This medication may reduce the duration of fever and other symptoms.

If you do not yet have a cold or the flu, take simple steps to protect yourself from these illnesses.

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water.
- Avoid touching your eyes, mouth and nose.
- Avoid people who are ill.
- Eat healthy foods.
- Exercise regularly.
- Get plenty of rest.

For more information on defining and treating a cold or the flu, contact the Springfield-Greene County Health Department at (417) 864-1658.